

# Assuring quality and improving competence in practice teaching: The development of a framework combining a re-accreditation system for practice teachers with continuing professional development

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**Summary:** This article describes how the Education, Training and Development arm of one social services agency has responded to the twin imperatives of quality assurance and continuing professional development in relation to practice teaching. The framework which has been developed to meet the requirements of both imperatives is discussed. The model's transferability to other spheres where social work education and training and practice development can converge is identified.

**Keywords:** practice teaching; quality assurance; continuing professional development; re-accreditation

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## **The impetus for assuring quality and continuing professional development**

Recent government directives have required the organisations delivering social care/social work to have quality assurance at the very heart of their delivery systems (Department of Health and Social Services & Public Safety, 2001). This is reflected in the regulatory structures which have been established in England (General Social Care Council, 2002) and in Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Social Care Council, 2003a). Such imperatives involve all social care/social work activities and are designed to protect the public, promote high quality practice and to encourage continual performance improvement. In relation to social work practice teaching and practice learning, these concepts are heralded in specific ways, originally through the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work's Paper 26.3 (1989 ) and latterly in Northern Ireland via various publications of the Northern Ireland Social Care Council, (NISCC, 2004). These papers identify the various components of a high quality practice teaching service to social work students including features such as accreditation of practice teachers and requirements for the approval of practice learning sites.

The concept of Continual Professional Development (CPD) in a formalised structure while familiar to professions such as nursing is relatively new to social work. It now finds itself at the centre of professional regulation with expectations for its pursuit laid down by the various Social Care Councils in the United Kingdom. This professional impetus complements the direction of government expressed through directives such as the *National Occupational Standards for Social Work* (2003b) and the publication *Best Practice: Best Care* (2001). Both these sets of guidance indicate expectations that social workers will reflect on their practice, pursue a variety of self-improvement activities and strive for continual professional development. With specific reference to practice teaching, Barron (2004) emphasised the importance of ongoing support and training as qualified practice teachers continue in the role. He reiterated the link between these activities and quality assurance through the maintenance of high standards. In relation to the social work profession in general, Popple et al (2002) reinforced that importance of CPD in equipping social workers to practice in a context of rapid and constant change. In relation to the changing world of practice learning especially the introduction of the Degree in Social Work, having

a systematic approach to the continuing professional development of practice teachers, and indeed others involved in facilitating practice learning has meant that the agency can ensure that provision is fit for purpose.

## **The Local Context**

The Southern Health and Social Services Board (SHSSB) is one of four such statutory health and social services agencies in Northern Ireland. It serves a resident population of just over 300,000 (SHSSB, 2003) and consists of three Health and Social Services Trusts based on geographical localities within the Board's area and one Hospitals Trust centred on the largest general hospital in the area.

There are approximately 350 professionally qualified social workers employed by the Board and the four Trusts. As of February 2006, 78 of these have the Practice Teachers Award. The professional training needs of the social services workforce are met through the SHSSB Social Services Training Consortium. This comprises the Trusts' Directors of Social Work/Social Services, the Board's commissioner of social services training and the manager of the Social Services Education, Training and Development Unit (SHSSB 2004). The Training Officers based in this unit are responsible for the in-service and post qualifying training and support and in this way offer a range of services to Practice Teachers across the Board's area.

## **Mechanisms for assuring quality in practice learning and practice teaching**

In accordance with the CCETSW (now NISCC) rules and requirements as laid out in the guidance *Assuring Quality for Agencies Approval for Practice Learning* (1996), the SHSSB is an "approved agency". It has a long history of providing practice learning for social work students from universities and colleges across Northern Ireland. Under previous Diploma arrangements in any calendar year 39 placements were provided under the contractual agreement with the DHSSPS and in

addition practice learning was provided to students across all 3 years of the Employment Based Diploma in Social Work Programme. This overall number is rapidly rising as increasing numbers of students on the new degree in social work courses move into practice learning placements. In Northern Ireland work based practice learning is managed through a regional partnership of academic institutions and social work agencies. At the local level a Training Officer from the ETD Unit has responsibility for coordinating practice learning and practice teaching provision across the SHSSB. She works in conjunction with key personnel in each of the Trusts to develop, plan, deliver and manage this activity. The Training Consortium, as discussed above, has ultimate responsibility for the provision and quality of practice learning and practice teaching within the SHSSB.

The SHSSB is committed to the provision of high quality learning experiences for social work students. An essential component of this is the availability of a pool of experienced, competent practice teachers. The SHSSB contributes to these features by:

1. Ensuring that all social work students are supervised by accredited practice teachers or candidates on the Northern Ireland Practice Teachers Training Programme (NIPTTP).
2. Ensuring that where the practice teacher is a candidate on the NIPTTP their practice assessor is a Training Officer from the Social Services E.T.D. Unit.
3. Providing a consultation service to all practice teachers. This is delivered by members of the E.T.D. Unit.
4. Providing formal support through regular meetings of the SHSSB Practice Teacher Support Group facilitated by a Training Officer.
5. Providing an in-service training programme specifically geared to the needs of practice teachers as identified through an Annual Training Needs Analysis process.
6. Maintaining a system of monitoring and reviewing placement provision. This is undertaken through the collation and analysis of Practice Learning Monitoring forms which are completed by both students and practice teachers and overseen by the Training Officer in conjunction with Trust colleagues.
7. Organising an Annual Review and Evaluation of Practice Learning. This includes practice teachers, on-site facilitators (staff involved in the provision of practice learning) representatives from university/

college providers of qualifying programmes and the ETD. Unit.

8. Developing a Reaccreditation Policy. The Re-accreditation Policy was introduced in 2002 and is unique in Northern Ireland. Its development and subsequent implementation was regarded as the logical next step in relation to the quality assurance mechanisms introduced and discussed above – see points 1-7. The policy is also regarded as compatible with the concept of continual professional development and the requirements of reaccreditation reflect the “continual” nature of individual responsibility and commitment over a period of time. This introduction of this quality assurance mechanism ensures that the SHSSB is well placed to meet the practice learning standards required by the NISCC. The Policy requires practice teachers to:
  - Attend a minimum of 3 Practice Teacher Support Group meetings during the period of student placement.
  - Supervise a minimum of 2 students within a 5 year period.
  - Attend designated “refresher” training once every 3 years.
  - In addition practice teachers are encouraged to participate in in-service training courses which focus on aspects of practice learning and attend regional standardisation events as appropriate.

Figure 1 (below) outlines the framework developed in the S.H.S.S.B. to draw the 2 strands of an organisational requirement to assure quality with regard to practice teaching with the individuals practitioner's requirement to demonstrate C.P.D.

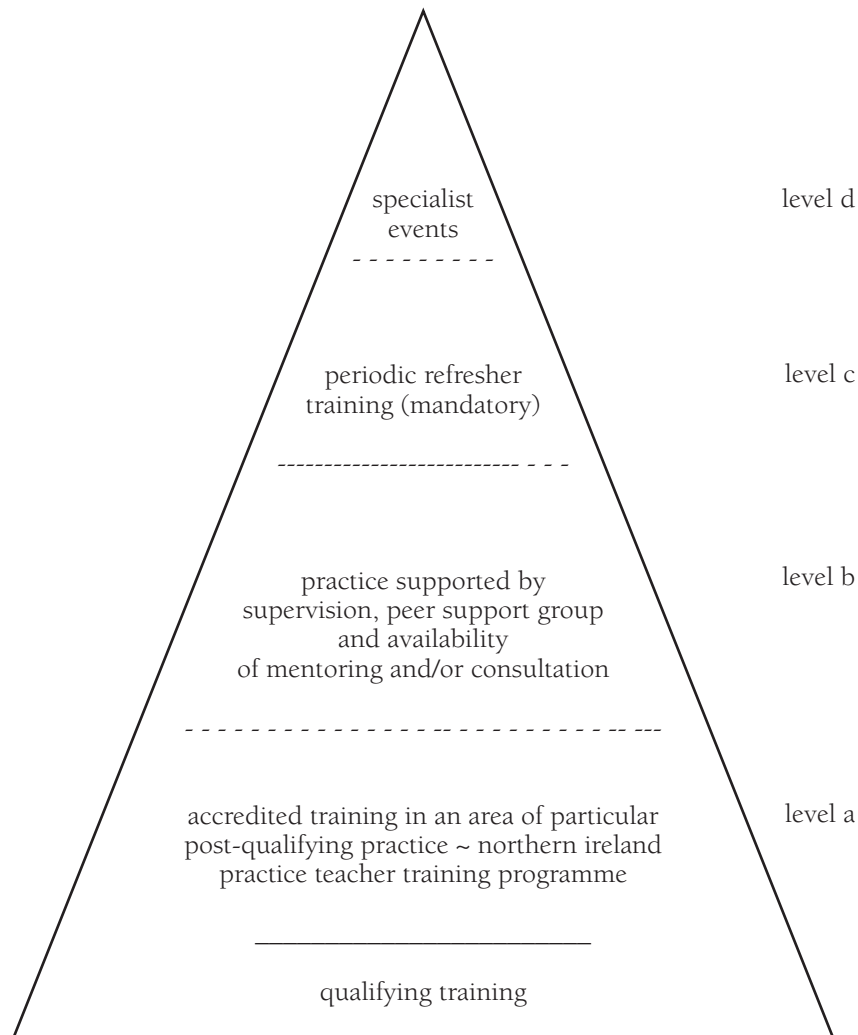


Figure 1. Continuing professional development: an integrated framework for assuring quality and continuing professional development

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## **The impact of a systematic approach to CPD and reaccreditation**

On an annual basis since 2002 a range of training and support events have been delivered within SHSSB for practice teachers in line with the model of CPD. These include a practice teacher support group, refresher training, specialist workshops and a celebration and review of practice learning.

### **Practice teacher support group**

This group meeting facilitated by a Training Office from the E.T.D. Unit aims to provide practice teachers with the opportunity to access peer support, discuss pertinent issues and share good practice. With the commencement of the Degree in Social Work this has proven to be a particularly valuable forum in that it gives practice teachers the chance to explore key aspects such as the practice learning requirements and the six key roles. A further advantage of the support group is that it informs the annual training needs analysis undertaken by the Education, Training and Development Unit. Through discussion and debate practice teachers are able to identify particular needs both at the refresher and specialist levels and to influence the content and structure of subsequent training events.

### **Refresher training**

This takes place annually, over a two-day period. The aim of refresher training is to offer practice teachers a period of time out of their work setting to:

- Revisit the management, teaching and assessment functions of their role.
- Explore the standardisation of practice.
- Develop their knowledge of current developments and good practice.

Refresher training incorporates an experiential approach and practice teachers are encouraged to actively engage in the exploration of knowledge, skills and values. This annual event has generated the production of a number of useful strategies and tools for use with students. Since 2002 the numbers attending refresher training on an annual basis has averaged 15 that is 20% of the SHSSB practice teacher population. Since the inception of the re-accreditation policy a significant number of SHSSB practice teachers have completed this training at least once. The opportunity to revisit the practice teaching role is welcomed by participants who often have a very busy work schedule with little time for in-depth reflection.

*'Excellent opportunity to reflect upon a range of learning and to tease out areas of practice which require further attention'. [Participant]*

### **Specialist training**

In line with the model of CPD two days of specialist training are also offered to practice teachers in SHSSB. These two separate days of training were first introduced in 2002 and statistical records affirm that to date the average attendance at such events is 30 participants.

While the CPD specialist training and the refresher training programmes are substantially different in terms of objectives and content, the common aim is the promotion of quality practice learning and the preservation and enhancement of standards. Both of these events contribute to the maintenance and development of competent and skilled practice teachers.

In the organisation and delivery of specialist training the aim is to actively involve practice teachers and to avail of the wealth of experience and expertise that already exists.

Whilst the re-accreditation policy is without doubt a significant factor evaluations from participants would strongly suggest that there are other influences that have led to the increase in participation of practice teachers in both the support group and training events. These include:

- Greater involvement of practice teachers in the identification of their learning and development needs.



- Greater opportunities to share good practice and to develop creative and innovative approaches to practice learning.
- Greater relevance of content with identified needs (for example: 'Working in a Diverse Society', 'Service User Involvement in Practice Learning', 'Community Development Approaches and Practice Learning').

The effectiveness of the approach developed in SHSSB is best reflected in the following statements made by participants when evaluating specialist training.

*'Excellent course. Lots of new information gained and interesting presentations given'.*

*'Course provided a clear and concise overview of degree programme and the complexities of standardisation issues across learning sites'.*

Overall the introduction of the re-accreditation process is proving to be effective and has contributed to the quality of practice teaching and the delivery of practice learning. The National Occupational Standards for Social Work (2003b) include a clear expectation that practitioners engage in reflective practice. Commenting on this Lloyd (2002) argues that the practitioner not actively improving his/her level of competence is 'not merely standing still but is actually going backwards' (p. 8).

The model developed in SHSSB aims to ensure that practice teachers have a range of opportunities to reflect and to engage in continuing professional development.

It recognises and promotes a work-based culture of personal and professional learning and will be an influential factor in assisting practitioners to meet the NISCC requirements for re-registration. A further advantage is that with the imminent publication of the NISCC Standards for Practice Learning the SHSSB has a model in operation that contributes ultimately to the quality of practice learning. It enables the retention of a pool of experienced and proficient practice teachers and this will undoubtedly assist the organisation to meet the challenge of providing quality learning opportunities to an increasing number of social work students.

## Conclusions

The authors contend that the development and implementation of the Practice Teachers' Re-accreditation Policy with its accompanying suite of support and training (see figure 1) is a good example of what Postle et al (2002) advocated as the way forward for the continuing professional development for social workers. They suggested that effective C.P.D. in social work organisations necessitates a holistic approach which the employer embraces from a learning rather than simply an operational perspective. This type of organisational shift takes time. It also takes champions and endorsement from top management. In the case of the Re-accreditation Policy and its related activity, the training section found in the Trust Practice Learning Coordinators local managers who provided support and encouragement for the initiative (the champions). It also found favour with Trust Directors of Social Work who regard the provision of high quality practice learning a key component in ensuring that they have a supply of newly qualified social workers available to meet their workforce requirements (endorsement).

The framework outlined in Figure 1 maps out a coherent structure for support, peer learning and continuing development which could be transferred to other aspects of contemporary social work practice. The A.B.C.D. framework identifies a systematic approach which can enable social workers to "attain, maintain and develop" competence by building on post qualifying professional achievements. Examples for transference include social workers who undertake the Approved Social Worker role and social workers who are involved in Joint Protocol and/or Achieving Best Evidence work in the fields of Child Protection and Adult Protection. It is contended that the formalisation of support, consultation and training activities into the type of system identified for practice teachers would enable practitioners to meet the twin purposes of updating operational competence and registration requirements for their continuing professional development. Furthermore it would establish a rigorous structure for aspects of quality assurance of these statutory responsibilities.

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